

The Easter Season

An Overview



The Incredulity of St. Thomas, Rembrandt, 1634

Fifty Days of Easter

SIGN OF THE CROSS

PRAYER

*God of mercy,
You wash away our sins in water,
You give us new birth in the Spirit,
And redeem us in the blood of Christ.
As we celebrate Christ's resurrection
Increase our awareness of these blessings,
And renew your gift of life within us.
We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
Who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
One God forever and ever.*

[Second Sunday of Easter, Morning Prayer, Christian Prayer: The Liturgy of the Hours, ICEL, Catholic Book, New York, 452]

- Catechist may gather with participants to complete this reflection, or it may be done at the participant's leisure.
- In the event that the catechist gathers with participants and leads this as a session, time should be allotted for responding to the journal questions either in their journal or in small groups of two followed by wider group sharing of insights gleaned from their reflections.
- If this is given as a home reflection, invite participants to respond to the questions in their journal after each section.

Questions for your Journal:

- ❖ Write everything you believe about the feast of "Easter."
- ❖ Why is it a significant feast?
- ❖ Why do we place so much importance on this feast?
- ❖ What does Easter have to do with your own life?
- ❖ The fifty days from Easter Sunday to Pentecost are celebrated as one great feast. Just as the Triduum consists of one liturgy that spans three days, so too the Easter season is one great Sunday—one feast that spans fifty days. The *General Norms for the Liturgical Year* states: "The fifty days from Easter Sunday to Pentecost are sometimes

called the great ‘Sunday (#22).’ The Sundays of the Easter season are included in the Easter event and story. In other words, Easter is not over on Easter Monday. It takes fifty days to celebrate Easter.

- ❖ The Church does not refer to each Sunday as that particular Sunday *after* Easter; rather it refers to each Sunday as the Sunday *of* Easter (i.e. the Second Sunday *of* Easter, the Third Sunday *of* Easter, etc.). All the Sundays of the Easter season are part of the Easter story.
- ❖ Every Sunday of the Easter season is a very solemn feast—a high holy, a Great feast. We call such feasts solemnities.
- ❖ The Eighth Sunday of Easter is called Pentecost Sunday.
- ❖ Another significant feast of the Easter season is the Ascension of the Lord. This feast takes place forty days after Easter on what is referred to as Ascension Thursday.
- ❖ There is symbolic significance in the number forty. The number forty is a sacred number in the Bible. It rained for forty days in the Old Testament, and the subsequent flood lasted for forty days. Moses stayed on Mount Horeb for forty days and the Israelites similarly wandered in the desert for forty days. Moses and Elijah fasted for forty days and Jesus fasted in the desert for forty days. The number represents a time of testing, trial, and probation followed by a time of renewal, restoration, hope and revival. There is a reference in the Acts of the Apostles to Jesus appearing during forty days. The Ascension story refers to forty days—a time of fulfillment. Thus, when determining the date for celebrating the feast of Ascension the Church determined that forty days after Easter was the appropriate time.
- ❖ The feast of the Ascension is a crucial element in the Easter story. Jesus had to ascend to the throne from which he came in order for the gates of heaven to be opened for waiting souls to enter eternity. Jesus had to ascend to his Father for salvation to be complete and fulfilled. It was not simply the resurrection that accomplished salvation—the ascension (Jesus’ return to his Father’s throne) was needed to complete it.
- ❖ In places where it is not a holy day of obligation the feast is moved and replaces the Seventh Sunday of Easter. The weekday masses following the feast of the Ascension are considered preparation for the feast of Pentecost. During these weekday masses we are invited with Mary, the women and the disciples to prayerfully await the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Questions for your Journal or for small group reflection:

- ❖ The seasons of Lent and Easter are a mirror image of the “*forty*” symbolism. Lent is that time of testing, discernment, and probation and Easter is that time of renewal,

fulfillment, hope and restoration. Both mirror the cycle of death and resurrection in our everyday lives.

- ❖ Have you ever experienced a time of waiting, testing, discernment that was followed by resolution, new life, hope and renewal? What did you learn from the experience?
- ❖ What did that experience teach you about the cycle of dying and rising in our everyday lives?
- ❖ What are your deepest hopes, prayers and dreams during this Easter season?

Various Elements and Themes of the Easter Season

- ❖ The Easter Vigil is the primary, principal Mass of the Easter celebration.
- ❖ Easter Sunday looks back at the Easter Vigil as the most important celebration of the Triduum.
- ❖ Easter Sunday is a joyful celebration of praise and thanks for Christ's sacrificial death and resurrection. Custom has it that more people attend the Easter Sunday Masses than the Easter Vigil. This is an unfortunate state of affairs because of the integral nature of the Easter Vigil. It is the primary feast of Easter. It is for this reason the Church insists that the priest should mention and explain the Easter Vigil in the Easter Sunday homily.
- ❖ In some locales the newly baptized (neophytes) return to the Easter Sunday Mass and participate with the entire assembly as a fully initiated member of the Eucharistic community. They become a symbol within the community. In many places they wear their baptismal garment/robe, carry their lighted baptismal candle in procession and are mentioned in the prayers of the faithful. They are a symbol of new life and resurrection. They remind all of us of the call of baptism and our call to renew our baptismal commitment to live as priest to serve God's people, prophet to proclaim the word of God and king to lead people to Christ.

Octave of Easter.

- ❖ The first eight days after both Christmas and Easter are referred to as the *Octave of Christmas* and the *Octave of Easter*. Each of those days is considered a high feast day—a solemnity. Each day of the octave is considered a solemnity of the Lord [*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, #24].
- ❖ In antiquity the neophytes—the new Christians--were immersed more fully into the sacramental life into which they were initiated at the Easter vigil.
- ❖ All the faithful attended daily Mass during the week of the octave (referred to as white week—an allusion to the baptismal garment they wore to Mass throughout the week) and they abstained from work. It was considered a week of renewal.

- ❖ The contemporary church no longer celebrates the octave in common practice, however it since still regarded as solemnities it has retained its liturgical and spiritual significance in the overall Easter mystery.

Scriptures.

- ❖ The Scripture readings for the season of Easter are all from the New Testament.
- ❖ The first reading is from the Acts of the Apostles—the chronicle of the first emerging Christian community that was charged with spreading the Good News.
- ❖ The Easter season brings the stories of Jesus’ post resurrection appearances and the prominent resurrection themes front and center such as:
 - Jesus’ appearance to the Twelve Apostles
 - Doubting Thomas story
 - Jesus appearance to the disciples on the road to Emmaus
 - Jesus’ appearance at the Sea of Tiberius.
 - Jesus’ encounter with Peter and his question to Peter: “Do you love me?” and his command to Peter to feed his sheep.
 - The pronouncement by Jesus that he is the Good Shepherd that lays down his life for his sheep.
 - Jesus announcement that he is the vine and his disciples are the branches.
 - Jesus’ announcement that he will send the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit—to continue his presence on earth.

The Fifty Days of Easter and the Rite of Christian Initiation.

- ❖ The fifty days of Easter is a very significant time for new Catholics. It is also referred to as the period of mystagogia that means, “uncovering the mysteries”. Ancient neophytes were given sacramental instruction by the bishop after the reception of the sacraments due to a belief that people were unable to fully understand the sacraments of baptism or Eucharist until they experienced it. St. Ambrose taught the newly baptized: "I shall begin now to speak of the sacraments which you have received. It was not proper for me to do so before this because the Christian faith must come first."
- ❖ The sacramental rites of initiation and the symbols of the Vigil manifest and make present the crucified and risen Lord. Bodies soaked in water, slathered in oil and shrouded in flowing white garments evoked memories of Christ's Paschal Mystery—his death and resurrection. St. Cyril, a great mystagogue (teacher of the mysteries) told the new Christians: “It has long been my wish to discourse to you on these spiritual, heavenly mysteries. On the principle, however, that seeing is believing, I delayed until the present occasion, calculating that, after what you saw that night, I should find you a readier audience when I am to be your guide to the brighter and more fragrant meadows of this second Eden”.³³
- ❖ During this period of mystagogia [uncovering the mysteries] the newly baptized reflect on the mysteries and symbols that were celebrated at the Easter Vigil. They reflect on their experience—what did I experience, what did it mean, what are the implications? Every Sunday homily of the Easter season is intended to unpack the Easter event and its implications for living a life of Christian discipleship.
- ❖ The entire community is to spend time asking the same questions the neophytes ask: “What did I experience? What did it mean and what are the implications for living the Good News throughout the liturgical year until the next celebration of the Lord's pasche and our ultimate annual renewal?”
- ❖ The Church gives thanks for the neophytes as they remind us that we should all be attentive to the process of conversion and renewal in our lives.
- ❖ “Mystagogy is a time for the community and the neophytes together to grow in deepening their grasp of the paschal mystery and in making it part of their lives through meditation on the Gospel, sharing in the Eucharist and doing the works of charity”[RCIA #244].
- ❖ The Easter season is an extended reflection on what it means to live the Paschal Mystery--take up our cross and follow Jesus.
- ❖ We need fifty days to thoroughly unpack the richness, fullness, mystery and majesty of the Easter event. We need the fifty days to teach us the implications of

living in the shadow of the cross and living the mystery of the Risen Lord. We need the fifty days to be fully renewed in the waters of death and resurrection.

- ❖ During the fifty days we become conscious of the power and presence of the Holy Spirit who was sent to us at Pentecost to continue the mission of Christ in his absence.
- ❖ As we journey through the liturgical year to the next Triduum, we slowly empty ourselves and become empty vessels in need of Easter filling.
- ❖ Easter then is a living memorial of the primary Christian symbols of Christ's passion, death and resurrection—light, word, cross, community, water, oil, laying on of hands, bread, and wine.
- ❖ Jesus' passage from death to life paved the way, opened the doors and mirrors the passage we must all make. Jesus shed his blood, thus inaugurating the new Covenant forged between God and humanity.
- ❖ Jesus' passage from death to life for the forgiveness of sins fulfilled all the promises God made with Israel since the creation of the world. Death lost its power. Christ's death and resurrection would guarantee that human beings could share eternal life with Jesus.
- ❖ We continue to share in Jesus' Passover today when we share in the Eucharist. During the Easter season we recommit to die and rise with Christ and to go out, teach and baptize all nations.

Questions for your Journal or for small group reflection:

- If someone were to ask you the ways in which the Holy Spirit is active in your life, how would you respond?
- What evidence is there in your life that the Holy Spirit lives within you?
- If you believe the Holy Spirit leads, guides and lives within you, what are the implications for your everyday life?
- What does the Easter event--the themes, symbols, stories--challenge you to become?
- What one thing are you willing to change in your life in order to more fully be the disciples Christ calls you to become?

CLOSING PRAYER

Anima Christi

Soul of Christ, sanctify me
Body of Christ, save me
Blood of Christ, inebriate me
Water from the side of Christ, wash me
Passion of Christ, strengthen me
O good Jesus, hear me
Within your wounds hide me
Let me never be separated from you.
Defend me from the malicious enemy.
In the hour of my death call me
And bid me come unto you
That I may praise you with your saints.
Forever and ever.
Amen